

Interview with  
 Gene Lowrey, Secretary  
 Community Service Organization  
 National Headquarters  
 Los Angeles, California  
 June 21, 1957

I have many ideas about the Bracero Program because I have been, at least, indirectly connected with it since 1944. From 1944 to 1953, I was with the Immigration Service in a sort of a public relations capacity. From time to time, I would ride in the busses with loads of wetbacks who were being taken from California down to Tiajuana and I had a chance to observe how the Border Patrol operated and I ~~was~~ also had ~~an~~ a chance to talk with men of the men. In general, I would say that the people with the Immigration and Naturalization Service are decidedly ~~unsympathetic~~ unsympathetic toward the Spanish speaking. For example, there is a widespread belief that all Mexicans understand and can speak English if they only wanted to and when they don't it is because they are being stubborn or evasive. You've got to remember that most of your upper ~~echelon~~ personnel in the Immigration & Naturalization Service have worked their way up from the Border Patrol and you've got to remember further, that most Border Patrol men are Texans; well, I hardly need to tell you what kind of racial attitudes they have. I have had them tell me that a Mexican is no better than an animal. And you can see this kind of attitude coming out in their dealings with people. During the round-ups of the wetbacks, ~~They~~ they would load pregnant women right in with the men into trucks and they would have to stand up frequently on the ~~way~~ long trip back to Mexico. I will never forget one of the guards who worked on these busses that I was telling you about that I rode with from San Francisco to the border; he was a real sadist if I have ever seen one. He took a delight in punching and shoving the men around and in saying "No." if they would ask to stop for refreshments or to use the bathroom.



Is it true that the Border Patrol was in cahoots with the growers in many cases, my answer to that is yes, definitely. They would wait time after time until the harvest was over before they would come in to round up the men even though they knew perfectly well that the men were there all along.

Now, since 1953, I have been working with the C.S.O. and I have been out in the field a good deal with Fred Ross in his efforts to set up chapters in Brawley and elsewhere; and I have talked with literally hundreds of Braceros. This wasn't part of my job, you understand, I just did it because I was interested, and I am particularly interested in the purely human aspects of this program. Let me give you some of my impressions: I have found Braceros to be, generally, a very high type of individual. They are, most of them, very devoted family men. Many of them don't drink even though God knows there are temptations enough in the sort of life they have to lead. I used to ride with them on the Greyhounds between Brawley and Mexicali and I would ask them what they were planning to do when they got to Mexicali. They would tell me that they just wanted to be there, they weren't planning to get drunk or to go to a whore house or anything like that; they were just going to stand around and talk and watch the people go by. The reason that I stress these things is because many of the articles that you read in the newspapers are actually attacks upon the character of these men. They are accused of deserting their families and of leaving behind illegitimate children when they leave and so forth. I can tell you that these attacks are not justified.

Do they have much contact with the surrounding communities? No, and the principle reason that they don't is that the growers don't want them mingling with the communities. The growers are afraid of two things: they are afraid in the first place, that the average public might actually learn what's going on, and secondly they are afraid that the men themselves would grow dissatisfied with their way of life. So what happens is that on the



rare occasions when the men are able to get into town, since the way has not been prepared for them to participate in social groups, etc., about all that they can do is wander up and down the streets; and the only people who are willing to have anything to do with them are various types of sharp-operators who are trying to make some money off of them.

You ask if the presence of the Braceros means that domestic workers are being pushed out of jobs. Naturally they are and this is very important. But it seems to me that the human aspects and problems are even more important. It seems to me a crime and a shame that more people aren't aware of this program and its abuses. Did you know that even those braceros who are able to get visas are being abused? What happens is that a grower who needs some men on a more or less permanent basis to do irrigating, ~~extra~~ work, let's say, will arrange for some of his braceros to return to Mexico and get visas to come back to work for him. He tells the Border Patrol about it and the Border Patrol sees that these men stay right there on the ranch. If they have an opportunity for a better job, it's just too bad for them. You know it used to be against the contract labor laws of the country to bring in anybody this way with a promise of a job and then to keep them on it; but, somehow or other the laws have gotten lost in the shuffle.

I have a very good friend that I got to know when I was working with the I.N.S. He came up here four times as a wetback, but the last time wasn't<sup>T</sup> able to get across the border and so he came as a bracero. I happened to run across him down in the Imperial Valley and I asked him how he was making out, he said ~~"I didn't"~~ he didn't like it and that he hadn't wanted to come as a bracero because as he said he knew "I'd be a slave."